



# WHISTLER SOCIETY

*NEWSLETTER No.54*  
*WINTER*  
*2026*



# THE WHISTLER SOCIETY

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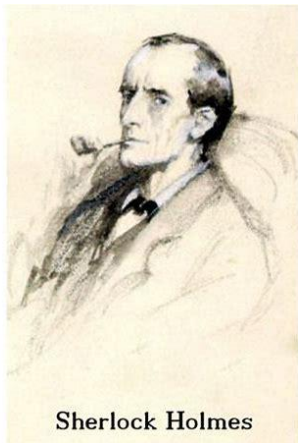
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*Cover Image: Nocturne in Grey and Gold: Chelsea Snow; James McNeill Whistler 1876; Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA*

## DANIEL E. SUTHERLAND - LETTERS FROM AMERICA

### Whistler and Sherlock Holmes

At this festive time of the year (I am writing in mid-December), I always enjoy reading two Christmas classics: Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* and Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Blue Carbuncle." Yes, the latter really is a Christmas tale, celebrating, as Sherlock Holmes himself reminds us, "the season of forgiveness." It also reminds me of the many similarities between Holmes and James Whistler. Naturally, they differ in some ways. Whistler, an American, was



Sherlock Holmes

born in July 1834; the Englishman Holmes was twenty years younger, born in June 1854 (even though his literary life did not begin until December 1887). They had contrasting personalities, the stoic, highly rational, emotionally detached consulting detective having little in common with the effervescent, boisterous, uninhibited artist. Both men craved tobacco, but while Holmes preferred his meerschaum pipe, Whistler smoked cigarettes almost exclusively. While Whistler enjoyed good wine and an occasional glass of absinthe, Holmes sometimes resorted to a seven-per-cent solution of cocaine.

But what of the similarities? Let's start with the people they knew or admired. Edgar Allen Poe offers a good example of the latter. I have written before about how Poe influenced Whistler's artistic theories. Holmes likewise profited from reading Poe, although, while Whistler gained most from his essays, Holmes derived important principles of detection from Poe's stories of mystery and intrigue. He was especially impressed by Poe's fictional detective C. Auguste Dupin. Holmes was reluctant to acknowledge that debt, always insisting (like Whistler) that his ideas were unique unto himself; but the line between his and Dupin's innovations and methods are indisputable.

Oscar Wilde provides another notable link, although in Holmes' case, it comes through his collaborator Conan Doyle. Whistler's association with Wilde is well documented. The witty exchanges between the two men, both in the press and personal meetings, regaled London society in the early and mid-1880s. Doyle first met Wilde when they were wined and dined by

the publisher of *Lippincott's Monthly* at a sumptuous dinner in 1889. Both men agreed over cigars to write a serial novel for the magazine. As a result, Wilde produced *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Doyle contributed *The Sign of Four*, one of Holmes' most intriguing cases. Doyle, recalling the meeting as "a golden evening," said Wilde left "an indelible impression" on him. "He towered above us all," Doyle explained, "and yet had the art of seeming to be interested in all that we could say. He had delicacy of feeling and tact."

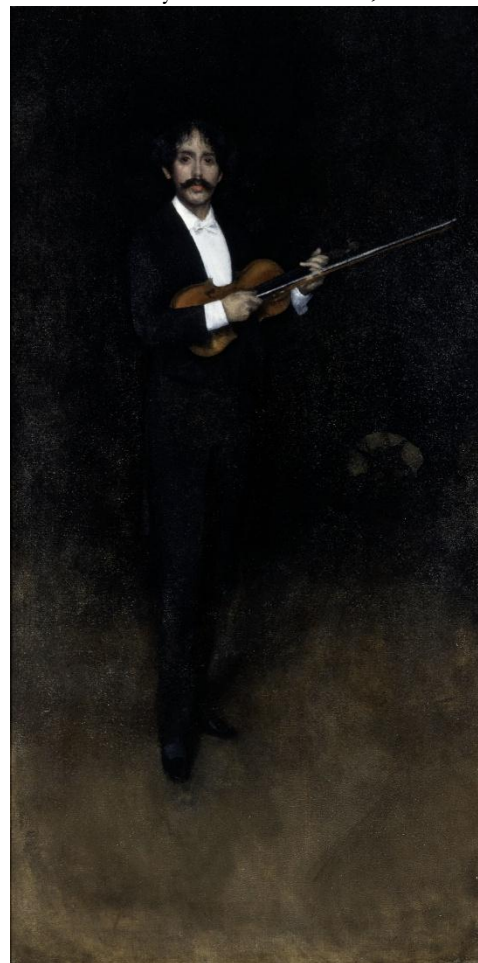


*Dorian Gray* ultimately involved Whistler, too. Their friendship being in tatters by this time, Wilde, reportedly presented the character of Basil Hallward, the artist so chillingly stabbed to death by Dorian, as a thinly disguised version of Whistler in an early draft of the novel. He eventually altered his description of Hayward, possibly, being aware of Whistler's litigious nature, wishing to avoid any legal difficulties.



Whistler and Holmes also knew Charles Augustus Howell. Acclaimed as a charming art dealer and collector with an uncanny eye for a bargain and unparalleled knowledge of the market, Howell was also one of history's minor villains, with a reputation for shady dealing and deception. Whistler initially finding him both useful and enjoyable company, Whistler

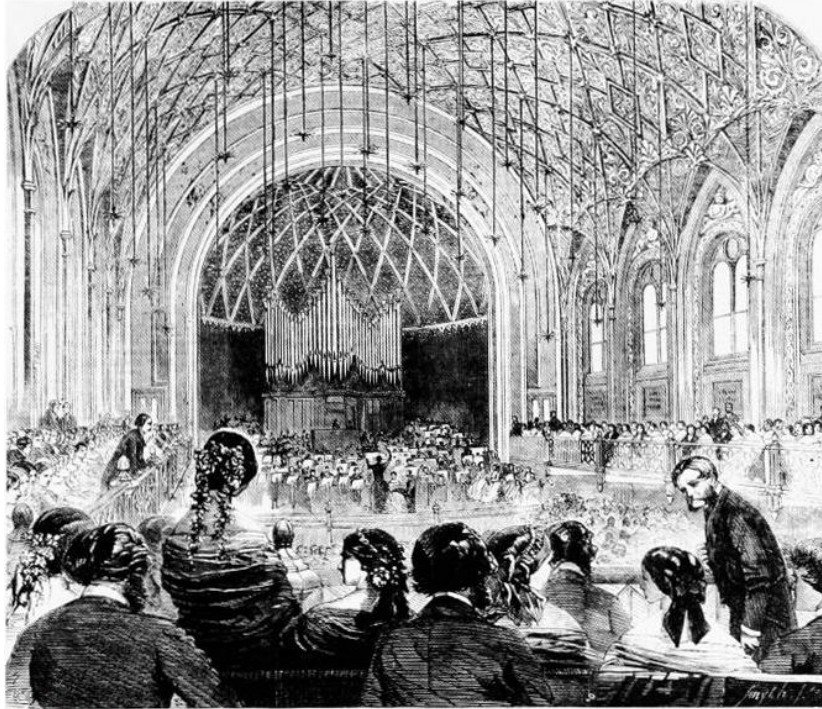
eventually parted ways with Howell. Holmes encountered the connoisseur when Howell stooped to blackmail. Holmes' biographer, Dr. John Watson, recounted the episode in "The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton." By then, Howell had been dead for more than a decade, but no one was fooled by the altered surname.



Pablo de Sarasate y Navascues offers another connection between Whistler and Holmes. The acclaimed violinist posed for one of Whistler's most famous portraits, after which he described himself as the artist's "devoted friend and ardent admirer." Holmes did not enjoy such a personal bond with Sarasate, but he, unlike Whistler, whose musical training was limited to boyhood piano lessons, was a skilled violinist and composer "of no ordinary merit," and he was enthralled by the Spaniard's virtuoso playing. Both men attended Sarasate concerts at St. James's Hall. For Holmes, the occasion served as a necessary diversion when investigating "The Red-Headed League," in 1890. The detective had already found the case to be a "three pipe problem" when he dragged Dr. Watson off to the concert hall for a spot of repose. "All

the afternoon he sat in the stalls wrapped in the most perfect happiness,” Watson observed, “gently waving his long, thin fingers in time to the music.”

St. James’s Hall itself played a further role in Whistler’s life. While the main auditorium was justly famous for its musical contributions to Victorian London, two smaller halls hosted notable lecturers. Charles Dickens gave his final public reading there in 1870, and Whistler took to the stage in 1885 for the premier of his “Ten O’Clock” lecture. Sadly, this venerable landmark, once wedged between Regent Street and Piccadilly, was torn down in 1905, its site now occupied by Le Meridien Piccadilly Hotel.



Holmes never mentions Whistler in his surviving correspondence. Nor does his name pop up in Watson’s catalogue of Holmes’ cases. However, the detective did recognize Whistler’s influence on the art world, and in one notable instance seemed to endorse it. Holmes pronounced the crime scene of his very first case, in 1881, as “a study in scarlet,” a description subsequently used by Watson as a title for the case. Evidently influenced by Whistler’s use of “arrangements” and

“harmonies” to describe his work, Holmes advised Watson, “Why shouldn’t we use a little art jargon? There’s the scarlet thread of murder running through the colourless skein of life, and our duty is to unravel it, and isolate it, and expose every inch of it.”

Holmes would not have known that fourteen years earlier, Whistler had told Henri Fantin-Latour that his approach to composition in painting was to have “the same colour reappearing continually here and there like the same *thread* . . . the whole forming in this way an harmonious *pattern*.” A remark Holmes made in 1888, when investigating the case of “The Greek Interpreter,” suggests that he would have enjoyed knowing that Whistler borrowed the metaphor at least partly from Poe. “Art in the blood is liable to take the strangest forms,” he told Watson.

Whistler mentions Holmes only once in his correspondence. In 1902, in reviling art critic Frederick Wedmore, Whistler proudly offered evidence of Wedmore’s literary “crimes” and “depraved state” in the manner of Poe and “the startling . . . Sherlock Holmes.” Certainly, there is little doubt that Whistler shared Holmes’ general approach to life: “I play the game for the game’s own sake.”

*Images in order of appearance: Sherlock Holmes; Conan Doyle; Charles Augustus Howell; Pablo de Sarasate y Navascues; St. James’s Hall*

*We continue to be grateful to Dan Sutherland for his Letters from America. Dan's forthcoming book will explore the enduring influence of James McNeill Whistler and the lives of those he knew and inspired.*

## FOR THE DIARY

WHISTLER SOCIETY SÉANCE - Wednesday 27th May 6PM BST

Mark your calendars for an extra special Séance with James MacNeill Whistler celebrating the Tate Exhibition of his work. Zoom details will be forthcoming with an opportunity to submit your questions for Mr. Whistler to answer during the Séance.

WHISTLER BIRTHDAY BRUNCH – Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> July 2026 11:30 AM

Mark your calendar for our annual Whistler Birthday Brunch in the Marquee at the Chelsea Arts Club. Tickets will be available to purchase in late May.

## FROM THE CHAIRMAN

This May brings a truly exciting moment for admirers of James McNeill Whistler: a major exhibition of his work at Tate, the first of its kind since the mid-1990s- curated by Dr Carol Jacobi. It offers a rare and wonderful opportunity to encounter first-hand not only the celebrated portraits and iconic paintings, but also the remarkable range of his watercolours, etchings, and sketches, revealing the full breadth of his achievement. Seen together, these works trace the evolution of Whistler's artistic vision and expressive style across his long and cosmopolitan career, encompassing scenes from London as well as Venice, France, Holland and beyond. The exhibition runs from 19 May until September, after which it will travel to Amsterdam, extending its reach to a wider international audience.

## EXHIBITIONS & EVENTS

### **JAMES MCNEILL WHISTLER**

- *TATE Britain - 21 May 2026 – 27 September 2026*

This retrospective – the first major European exhibition of Whistler's work in 30 years – brings together the artist's world-famous paintings alongside rarely, or never seen, works. It includes exquisite portraits, drawings, prints, and designs, from as early as his teens in St. Petersburg to the enigmatic late self-portraits. [Learn more...](#)

### **SEAN JEFFERSON - FAIRY PHENOMENA**

- David Messum Fine Art – 4<sup>th</sup> – 27<sup>th</sup> March

The Directors of David Messum Fine Art cordially invite the Members of the Whistler Society to the opening party for the new exhibition 'Fairy Phenomena' by Sean Jefferson.

**Wednesday 4th March 2026**

**6.30-8pm**

**Wine and canapés**

**Please RSVP: [cheska@messums.com](mailto:cheska@messums.com)**

Enter the reimagined world of myth, superstition, and wonder. Drawing upon the old folklore of Britain, Jefferson revives a time when the landscape was seen as alive with the invisible forces and mysterious presences. In an age increasingly defined by data and distraction, his paintings remind us that enchantment still has a place in the modern world. [Learn more...](#)

## LORD ARTHUR SAVILLE'S CRIME

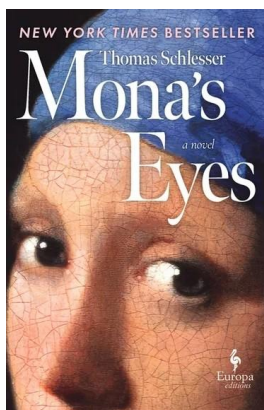
- Sadie Coles HQ 21 January - 21 March

The second exhibition in our new galleries on Savile Row is a group show inspired by Oscar Wilde's novella, *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime*. Wilde's story, with its eclectic cast of characters situated in acidly etched London, is the stimulus for an exhibition of works of various scales and mediums. Our building was initially built as an arts club in 1870, recalling a period of intimate exhibitions and society gatherings that Wilde fictionalised within the milieu of Mayfair. [Learn more...](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

*Mona's Eyes*

A Brief Review  
Daniel E. Sutherland



I am probably a step behind many of you, but I recently stumbled upon *Mona's Eyes* (2024), a novel by Thomas Schlessler (English translation from the French by Hildegard Serle). The plot is intended to tug at your heart strings. A ten-year-old girl who suffers a bout of temporary blindness is taken by her grandfather, as a type of therapy, to view fifty-two of the world's great paintings (one each week for a year) at the Louvre, Musée d'Orsay, and Centre Pompidou. As the book-jacket blurb explains, "Mona will discover not only the power of art, but also the meaning of generosity, doubt, melancholy, loss, and revolt. Each week, a new work of art, and each week another step toward an open-hearted embrace of life."

Fair enough, but the story also provides a good brief history of art, from Botticelli to Pierre Soulages. Of course, that must include Whistler, whose own chapter, somewhat predictably, is devoted to the portrait of his mother. Mona and her grandfather view it at Anna's rightful home in the Musée d'Orsay. (This caught me off guard since, despite having seen the portrait four times, it has *never* been at the d'Orsay when I visited!) Mona's grandfather tries to explain Whistler's interest in painting "arrangements" as a "pure space of forms and colors." Instead, Mona intuits Whistler's own emotional investment in the portrait. "What this



painting tells us,' she whispered innocently, 'is that a mommy is what's most sacred in the world.'”

Mona and her grandfather also contemplate another painting at the Orsay, Henri Fantin-Latour's *Hommage à Delacroix*, in which Whistler takes center stage. Mona is impressed by Whistler's "proud demeanor." A pity her grandfather did not explain that Fantin included his friend in this group portrait as a way of confirming Whistler's status, in Fantin's eyes, as the greatest painter of their generation.

Anyway, worth a read.



## SAY WHAT?

We invite you to share your ideas for humorous captions to Whistler's iconic portraits which we will share in our quarterly newsletters.



“Do you think the red stockings are a bit OTT?”

## LOOKING AHEAD

VICTORIAN SOCIETY SUMMER SCHOOL PROGRAM –

- Newport, RI/Chicago, IL/London, UK May June July 2026

The Victorian Society invites you to study architecture, art, landscape and preservation at one of their internationally acclaimed Summer Schools in Newport, Chicago or London.

Enjoy lectures by leading scholars, private tours of historic sites, engaging social experiences, and opportunities to get behind the scenes at museums and galleries. Open to graduate students, academics, architects and the general public...[Learn more](#)

## RELATED NEWS

### *MONET TO MATISSE: DEFYING TRADITION*

- *July 2026 Adelaide, Australia*

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An Australian-exclusive exhibition of masterworks from the acclaimed Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio, United States, will open at the Art Gallery of South Australia in July 2026 as the debut exhibition in AGSA's new Winter Art Series. [Read more here...](#)

## **BECOME A MEMBER OF THE WHISTLER SOCIETY FROM £15**

Membership to the Whistler Society is available internationally to anyone with an interest in the life and work of James McNeill Whistler and the myriad of individuals he knew and influenced his life. Our members range from academics to general enthusiasts and include writers and historians, artists and art dealers, curators and teachers, as well as students and everyday aficionados who wish to share in the history and legacy of one of the most significant artistic influences in nineteenth century art. Contact Joan Harper: [enquiries@whistlersociety.org](mailto:enquiries@whistlersociety.org)

## **LETTERS AND SUGGESTIONS TO THE EDITOR**

Should you wish to comment on or submit any relevant news anything raised in this, or any future newsletters, please feel free to contact us at [enquires@whistlersociety.org](mailto:enquires@whistlersociety.org).

## **FOLLOW THE WHISTLER SOCIETY ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

